

Response

Somalia: Armed groups and recruitment

Issue/question:

- Who is recruited to armed groups and how does the recruitment take place?
- Which armed groups are currently fighting the transitional government in South Somalia?

General remarks on recruitment for armed groups in Southern Somalia

Many years of conflict, record-high unemployment and poor prospects for the future, combined with a lack of political leadership, have provided fertile soil for many militias and violent extremist groups, such as al-Shabaab. The Ethiopian presence in Somalia during the period 2007-2008, and abuses committed by both Somali and Ethiopian government forces, also contributed strongly to creating support for the rebel groups in the population. Despite the Ethiopian withdrawal in January 2009 and the establishment of the government of national unity, al-Shabaab and the Hizb ul-Islam alliance continue their warfare and demand that the African Union's peacekeeping forces (AMISOM) leave the country. However, support for these Islamist groups in the population has been significantly reduced since January 2009. Civilians are also among the victims of the terrorist attacks against AMISOM and government targets in Mogadishu, and, moreover, radical Islam is alien to most Somalis.

At the same time, however, the militant groups pay poor, unemployed young men and give them clothes, food and weapons. Several international and Somali observers also point out that indoctrination and brainwashing are used as tools to recruit new members (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009). Different Islamist organisations have engaged in charity work in Somalia for many years, including running schools and providing medical services for large sections of the population who have lacked such services. These meeting places have given certain groups with a different agenda than humanitarian aid an opportunity to spread their message. According to well-informed sources, the use of threats and violence is neither common nor necessary in connection with recruitment to various armed groups, although no one denies that force may be used (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009 and June 2008).

The easiest place for extremists to recruit new members and soldiers is in the settlements of internally displaced persons. Here, people lack even the most basic necessities. Some international and Somali resource persons state that the groups have also been recruiting

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members from marginalised minority groups such as *Jareer*¹ (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009).

Al-Shabaab (Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujaahidiin)

This organisation was originally the youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). Al-Shabaab's leaders and several of its members were known for their very militant and dogmatic Islamist beliefs. The ICU controlled Mogadishu and large parts of Southern Somalia from the summer of 2006 until the Ethiopian intervention in December of the same year. In March 2007, al-Shabaab and other rebels launched a major assault on the Ethiopian forces and the transitional government in Mogadishu. In 2008, the movement was included on the US list of terrorist organisations.

Today, al-Shabaab consists of several fractions, groups and cells that stem from the original core group (interviews in Nairobi, June 2008 and March 2009). The recognised Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus (2008) points out that differing views on ideology, tactics and leadership contribute to internal schisms. One central leading figure is the so-called amir, Sheikh Mohamed Mukhtar Abdirahman 'Abu Zubeyr', an Issaq from Somaliland. He is probably identical with Sheikh Ahmed Abdi aw Mohamud 'Godane'. The movement is most likely led jointly by a group of key members (UN Security Council 2008).

Another key leading figure is Mukhtar Robow 'Abu Mansur', who is al-Shabaab's leader in the Bay and Bakool regions. Robow belongs to the Rahanweyne clan Leysan. He was spokesperson for the movement until the end of May 2009, when he was replaced by Sheikh Ali Mahmud Ragi 'Dheere' (Hiiraan Online 2009). Ma'alin Mohamed Jiinay and Hassan Ma'alin Takow are referred to as Robow's commandants. Robow's forces cooperate with other al-Shabaab units, including a group led by Mukhtar Timojili, who usually operates in Mogadishu (UN Security Council 2008). Other prominent members are Ibrahim Haji Jaama Mey'aad 'al-Afghani', Fou'ad Mohamed Khalaf 'Shangole' and Hassan Abdillahi Hersi 'Turki'. However, 'Turki' is the leader of the Hizb ul-Islam group Ras Kamboni and is only an ally of al-Shabaab.

Aden Hashi Ayro was the leader of al-Shabaab's Mogadishu unit and the forces in Southern Somalia until he was killed in May 2008. Today, al-Shabaab in this region is led by a group of younger leaders, such as Mukhtar Timojili, Hassan Afrah, Mahad Garadey and 'Abu Qatada' (UN Security Council 2008).

According to several international observers, foreign jihadists from Afghanistan, Chechnya and Pakistan are also fighting on the rebels' side. Moreover, it is claimed that they run the different al-Shabaab groups (international organisation, e-mail, 3 June 2009; Garowe Online 2009b).

The movement recruits boys between the ages of 13 and 18² who are paid 20 dollars a month, given mobile phone credits and an additional bonus of 10 dollars for every grenade they throw at government forces and AMISOM (interview with Somali resource person in Nairobi, 26 March 2009). The recruits are given training at al-Shabaab's training camps in the urban

¹ *Jareer* is the Somali term for the Bantu population, meaning 'hard hair'.

² The government forces also recruit young people, but the majority are over the age of 18. The Islamic Courts Union's soldiers are mainly men in their 30s or 40s (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009).

district of Daynile in Mogadishu, in the town of Ballidogle in Lower Shabelle, and in Labatan Jirow in the Baidoa district. Somali resource persons Landinfo met in Nairobi in March 2009 also said that recruitment takes place in the urban district of Eastleigh in Kenya.³ From there, the recruits are transported by bus to Somalia.⁴

Al-Shabaab finances its activities by means of donations from the diaspora, grants from friendly regimes (particularly Eritrea), local businessmen, charitable donations and, to a certain extent, by pressing the local population to make contributions (interview with Somali resource person in Nairobi, 26 March 2009). The organisation also has several websites, including www.kataaib.net, where it spreads its message.

Al-Shabaab refers to its military wing as the al-Usra Army. According to the expert group charged with monitoring the weapons embargo against Somalia (UN Security Council 2008), the al-Shabaab forces consist of the Sa'ad Bin Abu Waqaas, Mus'ab Ibnu Umeyr, Abu Muhsin (Aden Ayrow) and Imam Ahmed Gurey brigades.

In August 2008, spokespersons for the movement stated that Hisba forces had been established. According to al-Shabaab's own website, this religious 'uniformed police' have not only removed roadblocks, but also closed video shops and are generally overseeing that religious injunctions are complied with (UN Security Council 2008).

Hizb ul-Islam⁵

Hizb ul-Islam (Islamic Party) was founded by Ali Yassin Mohamed. It is an alliance of four groups that joined forces to fight President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and the new government that was formed in January/February 2009 (Wikipedia n.d.). The four groups are:

- Ras Kiamboni (Mu'askar Ras Kamboni), based in the Darood clans Ogaden and Majerteen.
- Dahir Hassan Aweys' ARS-Eritrea (also called the Asmara fraction, which has some support in the Hawiye Haber Gedir Ayr clan).
- Jabhatul Islamiya (the Islamic Front, led by members of the Hawiye Haber Gedir Ayr clan, among others).
- Mu'askar Anole

All the groups participated in the resistance to the Ethiopian presence during the period 2007-2008. According to well-informed observers in Nairobi, the alliance does not have a common ideological platform and is more a 'marriage of convenience'. The alliance is struggling with internal contradictions and schisms. In May 2009, the then leader Omar Iman handed over leadership of the alliance to Hassan Dahir Aweys after what many believe to have been an internal power struggle (Garowe Online 2009a). The internal conflicts also contributed to the alliance being split into two fractions – one led by Dahir Aweys and the other by the

³ Most of the inhabitants of this district are ethnic Somalis.

⁴ The bus journey to the Somali border cost approx. 300 dollars in 2008, but is now said to be cheaper (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009).

⁵ The group's name is also written Hizbul Islaami, Hisbi Islam and Hezb ul-Islam, depending on the source.

notorious warlord Yusuf Mohammed Siad 'Indha Adde', who joined the government forces shortly before Aweys' takeover of power (Xinhua 2009).

Hizb ul-Islam has many members who are minors (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009).

Defections from armed groups

In reply to the question of reprisals for defecting from militias and rebel groups, several Somali resource persons who Landinfo met in Nairobi in March 2009 said that it varies depending on the type of militia. It is, in any case, the defector's family that is held to account. The militias that are governed by business interests will ensure that the family pays compensation to the militia if their son defects, while religiously motivated groups may take far more serious reprisals, including the use of violence. Several observers told Landinfo at meetings in June 2008 and again in March 2009 that resisting al-Shabaab's authority or defecting from the movement may result in death. The risk of being found is great because al-Shabaab has a well-functioning intelligence network, the local communities are transparent, and newcomers are easily noticed.

As for clan militias (which can also be militias financed by businessmen), people are expected to participate, but the use of violence or threats in connection with recruitment is uncommon or unnecessary – loyalty to the clan is deep-seated and participation is therefore natural. Defecting from such militias means being accountable to the clan elders. In such cases, violent punishment is highly unlikely, according to Somali resource persons (interviews in Nairobi, June 2008 and March 2009). Defecting from militias led by warlords, on the other hand, may entail a certain risk of violent reactions, according to the same sources.

A response consists of answers to specific questions presented to Landinfo by case workers within the Norwegian immigration authorities. Responses are not intended to provide exhaustive reviews of a topic or theme, but should answer the specific questions posed and include relevant background information.

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